

# This Week in the Woods December: Week Four

DECEMBER: WEEK FOUR



Mouse (subnivian layer)



Eastern white pine bending in snow



Arthrographis cuboidea stain (?)



Beech leaves (marcescence)



Northern cardinal



Mossy north side of tree



Spruce resin



Boreal oakmoss



Turkey tail fungus

**This Week in the Woods** deep snow blanketed the region, and birds flocked to feeders. For mice, voles, and other small creatures, the snow brought protection from the cold, and cover from predators. Here's an [Outside Story essay by Barbara Mackay](#) describing the value of this new **subnivian** (under the snow) habitat, and predators' adaptations to hunt prey they cannot see. As Mackay notes, owls dive talons-first into the snow to seize small rodents, and likewise, "with an acrobatic pounce," foxes and coyotes, "will dive right in for their meal." It turns out some domestic canines also perform acrobatic pounces, which is how we captured this image of a



surprised, snow covered mouse. (The photographer intervened before this little guy turned into lunch.)

Powdery snow poses little problem for **eastern white pine trees**. As Dave Anderson notes in this segment from the [Forest Society's "Something Wild" podcast on NHPR](#), pines and spruce "simple fold branches or bend to shrug off snow." You can observe this winter coping technique by comparing the upper and lower growth tiers of a pine tree after a heavy snow; the top boughs typically shrug off their snow loads early and rise back to their normal orientation. Lower boughs, which accumulate not only their own share of snow but the top boughs' discards, are often bent, umbrella-like, towards the ground.

In a mostly white landscape, fungal tree stains become more noticeable. As noted in this [post from Fine Woodworking magazine](#), "**Arthrographis cuboidea** is responsible for most of the cotton candy pink stains you see in lumber of hardwoods." While pink wood may not be everyone's cup of tea, spalting – another word for the coloration of wood by fungi – is popular among many fine furniture makers and other wood artisans.

Why do so many beech trees – especially young trees – hold onto their leaves throughout winter? There's no sure answer for this, but Michael Snyder shared some common suggestions in the [Winter 2010 issue of Northern Woodlands magazine](#). **Marcescence**, the fancy word for winter leaf retention, may help young beech by serving as a snow fence. Or maybe the trees wait to drop their leaves until the time in spring when they're most needed as compost? As Dave Anderson notes in the same ["Something Wild" segment](#) cited above, beech are relative newcomers to the Northeast (arriving a mere few thousand years ago) and may have not fully adapted yet to northern winters. Side note: Mike Snyder, who now serves as the commissioner of Vermont Forests, Parks and Recreation, wrote his *Woods Whys* column for Northern Woodlands for many years, sharing all kinds of great forest information. Many of his essays are now compiled in a book of the same name; [learn more here](#).

A bright red male **northern cardinal** seemed the perfect bird to feature this holiday week... although the one we could find insisted on lurking under the feeder instead of on a more picturesque evergreen perch. As described in their species profile for Cornell Lab of Ornithology's [Birds of the World site](#) (available by paid subscription), northern cardinals first arrived in the Northeast in around 1900. In the first years of the 20th century, the birds were only found in two counties in New York, and they didn't get to Massachusetts until the 1950's. Now, cardinals live year-round throughout the region, except in portions of New York and Maine. Their success may be due to a combination of warming winters, easily accessible winter food at bird feeders and humans' habit of creating shrubby, dense foliage habitat that the birds favor for nesting. Although you're unlikely to hear them this time of year, cardinals are also notable because the

females as well as the males sing. Here's an [audio clip of cardinal song](#) from the American Bird Conservancy, and here's an [Outside Story essay by Susan Shea](#), describing their spring nesting behavior.

Most **moss** species thrive in damp conditions, protected from bright light. For that reason, in the northern hemisphere, tree-growing moss species tend to grow more successfully on the shadier, northern sides of their host trees. This general observation doesn't apply to every tree, of course, but a good rule for woods navigation is to look for the moss growing pattern. Here's an [Outside Story essay by Bill Amos](#) that mentions this trend, and notes that tree trunks can have different microhabitats, "identifiable...simply by conditions of light and dark, moisture and aridity, movement of air and water, and degree of shelter."

You'll often find **resin** oozing out of the trunks of spruce and other conifers. Contrary to popular belief, it isn't sap. It doesn't transport nutrients up a tree, and it's not soluble with water. Instead, it's a thicker, stickier substance, produced by specialized cells, and used defensively to cover wounds and seal out would-be insect (and other) invaders. It has a rich cultural history; Amber, for example, is a type of fossilized resin, and hardened spruce resin has long been used as chewing gum. Here's a [post about resins from the U.S. Forest Service](#), and a [second U.S. Forest Service post](#), focusing on uses of spruce resin.

We found several clumps of **boreal oakmoss** on trails this week, probably knocked down as snow piles fell from branches. Despite its name, boreal oakmoss is a lichen, typically found growing in sunny spots up on trees. It's easy to confuse with beard lichen, but one tell is that the latter has a stringier appearance. Here's an [article published in March](#), noting that boreal oakmoss was one of seven nominees vying for the great honor of being Canada's national lichen. In the end, star-tipped reindeer lichen won, its victory no doubt secured by the powerful Rudolph voting bloc.

On a walk just before the snow fell, we stumbled on some beautiful rosettes of **turkey tail fungus**. Here's an [Outside Story essay by Meghan McCarthy McPhaul](#), who notes that the fruiting bodies of the fungus persist through winter. "While other fungi, so abundant in the autumn woods, fade away by winter, turkey tails endure, and bridge the color gap to spring."

*Our thanks to The Frank and Brinna Sands Foundation for helping to support this series.*

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